

BETWIXT DEMOCRACY, OCHLOCRACY AND THE LIKE: INTERROGATING CONTRADICTIONS OF THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC ORDER

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Abstract

This paper explores the contradictory character of liberal democracy with particular reference to its contemporary manifestations. By way of qualitative analysis of secondary sources, the paper posits that the practice of democracy has been fraught with contradictions and that such contradictions (such as mobocracy, civil licentiousness and restiveness) have engendered conditions that tend to negate the essence and purpose of the practice. From the perspective of the Arab Spring and Ukrainian crisis, the paper contends that the contradictions of democracy, as exemplified in mob rule and civil restiveness, have belied the assumption that liberal democracy is the ultimate socio-political order. The paper submits that the prospect of resolving the contradictions of liberal democracy lies in the return to republicanism which depicts the original intent of the democratic concept and practice.

Keywords: Democracy; ochlocracy; mob-rule/mobocracy; licentiousness; contradiction; republicanism

1. Introduction

Democracy, arguably, is the essence of the current global order. The prevailing global order is characterized, among other things, by the ascendancy of capitalism, liberal ideology and Western civilization on the world stage. In this context, democracy has been deified and vigorously propagated by the West as a desideratum for political stability, economic recovery, good governance, and sustainable development of nations (Okoli, 2003).

The currency of democracy as the dominant ideological mode of the new world order is exemplified by the waves of democratization which have been spreading across the world since the eve of the new millennium (Odojin

and Omojuwa, 2007). This “millennial global recrudescence of democracy” (Okoli and Orinya, 2013:1) tends to have defined democracy as the ‘ultimate good’ in terms of systems of governance. It is, therefore, often assumed that democracy depicts a grand framework for governance with little or no blemish. This assumption, however, can hardly be sustained considering the extent of systemic anomie, crisis, instability and quality deterioration that has befallen the democratic processes and practice around the world.

Functionally, democracy has been associated with series of systemic defects and contradictions that tend to negate its very essence and purpose. In this paper, an attempt is made to explore this contradictory character of democracy with particular reference to its contemporary manifestations. The paper posits that the practice of democracy has been inherently contradictory and that its contradictions have engendered conditions that tend to negate its essence and purpose. The degeneration of liberal democracy into civil licentiousness and restiveness as well as mob-rule in some polities points to this trajectory.

2. Frame of Reference: Democracy and Ochlocracy Conceptualized

Two key concepts form the frame of reference for this paper. The concepts are democracy and ochlocracy. Conceptualizing democracy should not delay us here. This is more so given the avalanche of works that have given adequate attention to the concept of democracy (Renwick and Swinburn, 1980; McLean and McMillan, 2003; Enemuo, 1999). Suffice it to note that democracy is a system of government whereof elected representatives hold and exercise political power at the instance of the people to whom they are beholden for their mandate. The conception of democracy in this paper presupposes the liberal tradition of the democratic practice (liberal democracy), which has since attained global dominance.

The concept of ochlocracy originally derived from the Greek word ‘okhlokratia’, which means ‘mob-rule’. The term was believed to have been coined by Polybius (an ancient Greek Philosopher) who used it to denote the negative or perverse version of popular rule– democracy (Gibbon, 1862). In ancient Greek Political thought, ochlocracy was considered as one of the degenerate (bad/perverse) forms of government as Table 1 indicate.

Table 1: Good Vs Bad Government in Ancient Greek Political Thought

GOOD TYPE	BAD TYPE
Monarchy	Tyranny
Aristocracy	Oligarchy
Democracy	Ochlocracy

Source: Adapted from Wikipedia (2014, February).

In Table 1, Ochlocracy is classified alongside tyranny and oligarchy as bad forms of government. This implies that they detract from the interest

of the whole community (common good) and favour the exclusive interests of a group or individual at the expense of justice (Wikipedia, 2014, February). Ochlocracy has, therefore, been characterized as a corruption or perversion of democracy; just in the same way tyranny and oligarchy are corruptions of monarchy and aristocracy respectively. Table 2 hereunder gives insights into this observation.

Table 2: Typology of Degenerate Governments in Ancient Greek Political Thought

DEGENERATE GOVERNMENT	NATURE OF DEGENERATION
Ochlocracy	Democracy spoiled by demagoguery or tyranny of the majority/rule of passion over reason
Oligarchy	Aristocracy spoiled by corruption
Tyranny	Monarchy spoiled by lack of virtue

Source: Adapted from Wikipedia (2014, February).

The concept of Ochlocracy is scarcely fashionable in everyday usage. What has been so popularly used in its stead is the concept of mobocracy, which emerged from the much more recent colloquial and journalistic etymology (Wikipedia, 2014, February).

3. Theoretical Framework: Dialectical Materialism

Dialectical materialism is at the core of Marxian Political Economy. In Marxian nomenclature, ‘dialectics’ refers to the mechanics of contradictions (Okoli, 2009). Marxian scholars apply the concept to denote the contradictory essences of social phenomena. Hence, the theory of dialectical materialism holds that social realities are inherently contradictory, and that their contradictory nature is determined by their material underpinning (McLean and McMillan, 2003). Contradiction is said to have occurred when a system produces a condition that threatens or negates its safe functioning or existence (Ake, 1981; Okoli, 2007; 2009).

Dialectical materialism, as a theory, assumes that social realities are composed of contradictory elements that derive their force and vitality from matter: the conditions and relations of production. The theory holds that every social phenomenon is a continuous and dialectical process of unfolding and becoming; whereby an extant condition (thesis) begets a contradictory condition (antithesis) and the contradiction between the two (thesis and anti-thesis) is resolved in a qualitatively higher state of being called synthesis (McLean and McMillan, 2003). Once the synthesis is attained, the whole process re-enacts itself in such a manner that the synthesis becomes a new thesis and the process recurs then again (Epelle, 2004; Okoli, 2009).

Applied to the context of this paper, it is to be observed that democracy, as a political practice, is inherently contradictory. It is not a destination; rather, it is a dialectical process of societal transformation that

has the propensity to engender conditions that negate its very essence and vitality. In this regard, it is to be pointed out that the phenomenon of mob-rule (mobocracy) is a necessary contradiction of democracy in its dynamics of degeneration and transformation.

4. Contradictions of Democracy

Democracy is inherently contradictory. As a social order, the practice of democracy in parts of the world has been associated with trends and dynamics that tend to negate the essence and vitality of the practice. As John Adams aptly observes, “Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. Therefore never is a democracy yet that did not commit suicide” (cited by Washington, 2011, para.1). Underscoring a critical dimension to the contradictions of democracy, Washington (2011, para. 6) aptly opines:

A pure democracy is tyranny of the majority – whatever the mob or majority wants, regardless of considerations of God, Natural Law, Morality or constitutional limitations. This view came out of Thomas Hobbes “Leviathan” (1651), which originated the false idea we have a “right to whatever we want, which is deification of legalized licentiousness”.

Implicit in the above citation is the notion to the effect that democracy has the abiding tendency to result in excessive license and ‘mob-rule’ both of which ultimately lead to self-defeat or self-negation of its essence and end. This tendency of democracy has found expression in political crises and instability in democratic polities of the world. Hence, there is a widespread ambivalence amongst statesmen and the citizenry regarding the utilitarian and beneficent value of democracy. This is evident in the following assertions (Washington, 2011, para. 11):

i. “The known propensity of a democracy is to licentiousness, which the ambitious call, and the ignorant believe, to be liberty”. – Fisher Ames

ii. “A simple democracy...is one of the greatest evils”. – Benjamin Rush

iii. “In democracy...there are commonly tumults and disorders.... therefore a pure democracy is generally a very bad government. It is often the most tyrannical government on earth”. –Noah Webster

iv. “Pure democracy cannot subsist long or be carried into the departments or state; it is very subject to caprice and the madness of popular rage”. – John Witherspoon

v. “We have seen the tumult of democracy terminate...as (it has) everywhere terminated, in despotism...Democracy! Savage and wild. Thou who wouldst bring down the virtuous and wise to the level of folly and guilt”. – Governor Morris

The afore-mentioned observations have, to a large extent, been found to be true in most democratic polities of the world. This is evident in the spate of violence, crises and maladies that often characterize the democratic process. The mass pro-democracy movement in the Middle East and elsewhere since 2011 has vividly produced a pattern and outcome that buttress the fore-going observations.

To be sure, the contradictions of democracy are evidently manifest in all democratic systems, although the scale, dimension and severity may vary. Even in the so-called ‘super democracies’ of the West, the practice of democracy has been characterized by the prevalence of elitism over pluralism. This is in addition to the issues of civil licentiousness, which has been severally underscored elsewhere in this paper. In the less democratic or aspiring democratic systems, the contradictions of democracy are pervasive and rather critical, finding expression in the following outcomes:

- i. electioneering and transition crises;
- ii. populist pressures, leading to violent uprising; and
- iii. succession debacle, leading to endemic political instability, etc (cf. Jinadu, 2008).

In view of the foregoing, therefore, characterizing democracy as the quintessence of civil rule, or the paragon of popular government, is at best terminologically misleading.

5. Insights from the Arab Spring (2011)

The Arab Spring refers to the mob-like populist activism that rocked the Arab World in 2011. According to Manfreda (n.d, para.2), it “was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle-East in early 2011” where-in people took to the streets in a popular demand for political liberties and social justice.

The concept of ‘Arab Spring’ was made popular by the Western media in the aftermath of the successive uprising in Tunisia that led to the ouster of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, triggering off similar anti-government protests in most Arab countries in early 2011. The term was a reference to the turmoil in Eastern Europe in 1989, when seemingly impregnable Communist regimes began falling under the pressure from mass popular protests in a domino effect (Manfreda, n.d., para.4).

The reasons for the Arab Spring are many and varied. They include the following:

- i. Popular resentment at the dictatorial political order prevalent in most Arab countries
- ii. Need for constitutional reforms to guarantee more civil liberties and social justice

- iii. Prevalence of unemployment and livelihood crises in some Arab states
- iv. Demand for the enforcement of strict Islamic Laws and norms
- v. Growing socio-economic inequality between the privileged political elite and the populace and the feeling of relative deprivation implicit
- vi. State repression, police brutality, and the corrupt tendencies of the ruling elite, etc.

The pattern of the Arab Spring has been more or less the same across the affected countries. It has largely been the case of amassed mob of protesters ‘marching’ and ‘occupying’ strategic public avenues in state capitals. Such protest movement has resulted in remarkable political changes in some countries of the Middle-East or Arab world. See Table 3 for insights.

Table 3: Comparative Outcomes of the Arab Spring

COUNTRY	OUTCOME	REMARK(S)
Tunisia	Regime change and precarious transition	Grappling with the challenges of post-conflict reforms
Egypt	Regime change and precarious transition	Grappling with instability and sectarian violence
Libya	Civil war and regime change	Grappling with post conflict instability
Syria	Civil War(on-going)	The incumbent and the opposition have been locked in internecine battle since 2011
Yemen	Precarious transition	Grappling with the challenges of post-conflict reforms
Bahrain	Constitutional Reforms	“ “
Jordan	Constitutional Reforms	“ “

Source: Authors

Generally, the ultimate outcome of the Arab Spring is yet to finally crystallize. The significance of the development is that it points to a “long-term change whose final outcome is yet to be seen” (Manfreda, n.d., para.10). More importantly, the development has since demystified the apparent impregnability of the Arabian despotic regimes in such a manner that governments in that contexts and elsewhere cannot afford to take quiescence of the people for granted. Over all, the power and import of mob activism have been so vividly demonstrated in the Arab Spring episode. Thus, any government, democratic or not, that takes its invincibility for granted does so at its own peril. But the aftermath of the Arab Spring so far has not totally vindicated the pro-democratic populist struggles. What is in place in some of the affected states is a highly precarious atmosphere that negates even the avowed democratic aspirations of the people.

6. The Ukrainian Example (2013-Date)

The mass protests in Ukraine started in November, 2013 following the perceived stance of the Viktor Yanukovich government to align with the Russian Economic bloc. Since then, “protesters have occupied Maidan in Kiev, battling police, and howling for Yanukovich’s resignation” (Buchanan, 2014 para.5).

The mob uprising in Ukraine has sharply divided the nation into two antagonistic groups, namely the West favouring affinity with the European Union and the East favouring close ties with Russia. The dynamics of the uprising in the recent months (January – February, 2014) have not only constituted a threat to the country’s democracy; it has also placed the country on the precipice of disintegration (Buchanan, 2014).

To mitigate the situation; Yanukovich was intimidated into making some strategic concessions to save both his regime and the nation. Consequently,

As the crowds grew violent, he dismissed his government, offered the prime ministry to leader of the opposition, repealed the laws lately passed to crack down on demonstrations, and took sick (sic) for four days (Buchanan, 2014: para.14).

More recently, Yanukovich announced a broad-based measure to end the prevailing crisis in his country. The planks of the measure are:

- i. Constitution of government of National Unity
- ii. Drastic constitutional reforms, and
- iii. Rescheduling of the general election late 2014 instead of the official time-table of 2015.

The afore-mentioned measures were informed by the need to appease the protesting mob that have virtually taken over the civic domain of Ukraine, make the polity critically ungovernable, as well as pressing for Yanukovich’s resignation. The intransigence of the demonstrators finally led to the ouster of Yanukovich on Saturday February 22, 2014. The Ukrainian example underscores the vitality of populist mob uprising in bringing about political change in a democratic polity. More significantly, it has revealed the inability of a democracy to hold its own and subsist in the event of an internally engendered contradiction.

Considered against the shadow of the Arab Spring, it would appear that a new pattern of political change is evolving whereby populist revolution is taking the place of institutionalized civil transition in bringing about change of government or regime in a polity. This trend has not always produced qualitative democratic changes in most cases, as popular expectation would hold. In the case of Libya, for instance, the outcome has been sectarian violence and widespread political instability that significantly compare the tragedy of the 2011 civil war. In Egypt, on the other hand, the

populist uprising incidentally resulted in the emergence of the reign of the fundamentalist Islamic Brotherhood whose style of governance and ideology are antithetical to the democratic ideal. During its short, controversial stay in power, therefore, there occurred widespread violations of the rights of minority religious and secular groups in the country. So, rather than entrenching a popular democracy, the populist movement in Egypt and, to a reasonable extent elsewhere, has materialized in a mob-rule whereby the reign of passion over reason becomes the defining character of statecraft. This is the tyranny of the majority institutionalized.

7. Democracy Vs Ochlocracy: Implications for the Common Good

The essence of good government is not the achievement of nominal majoritarianism or libertarianism. It consists in the moderation of republicanism and utilitarianism in service of “the true common good based on Natural Law” (Washington, 2011, para. 5). Liberal democracy has so far proven inefficient in realizing this grand objective across the world owing to its innate contradictions and failings. In the West where liberal democracy is believed to have taken its firm roots, this contradictions manifest in the fashion of democratic licentiousness. In this regard, there prevails a sense of a moral permissiveness among the public, who tend to lay claims to even the most reprehensible ‘rights’ in the name of civil liberty. At the roots of the democratic licentiousness lies the insatiability of civil liberty, which seems to be an abiding untoward tendency inherent in liberal democracy. This tendency has been evidenced in the following developments:

- i. Legalization of abortion and euthanasia, or clamour to that effect
- ii. Decriminalization of gay practice and same-sex marriage, or clamour to that effect
- iii. Moral permissiveness as exemplified in the tacit civic approval of nudity, pornography, sodomy, and commercial sex.

Elsewhere, the millennial wave of democratization has been associated with a number of critical contradictions. As we have seen in the cases of the Arab Spring (2011) and the Ukrainian crisis (2013-date), democratic pressures in those contexts have culminated into anomic circumstances, thereby negating the very ideals of civil rule. The mobilization of populist rage to intimidate and unseat an incumbent government may be ostensibly democratically plausible. But quintessentially, it has proven to be a veritable avenue to mob-rule, exemplified in the tyranny of the amassed ‘majority’ against the minority rights and interests. This defies the utilitarian essence of democracy and betrays one of its fundamental contradictions; that is, the propensity of democracy to degenerate from civil rule to mob-rule. The significance of the foregoing is that the global practice of democracy appears to be undergoing a

dialectical transformation capable of purging it of its operational deterioration and restoring it to its original intent: republicanism.

To say the least, democracy is not the best or ultimate form of civil rule as is widely acclaimed. Aristotle, the father of Political Science, placed no premium on democracy. In fact, he classified democracy as one of the degenerate forms of government, along-side tyranny and oligarchy. According to him, democracy is a corruption or perversion of 'polity' (Washington, 2011). By 'polity', Aristotle must have presupposed a pragmatic genre of civil rule whereby the institution of republican fiduciary is organically situated to advance the common good under the Natural Law and universal morality. By Aristotelian conception and classification, therefore, democracy does not pass for the ideal system of government. This is because democracy, among other things, empowers even the 'fickle crowd' to assume and exercise the majoritarian stake to power. This stake is subject to abuse and when the abuse occurs, the consequences are rather dicey and counter-productive to the democratic project.

8. Conclusion

Democracy is inherently contradictory. Its contradiction emanates from the innate verities that define the practice, prominent among which are: majoritarianism and libertarianism. The majoritarian principle has often degenerated into the tyranny of the majority, thereby negating the utilitarian inclusiveness of democracy. On the other hand, the idea of libertarianism tends to have promoted democratic licentiousness, which also negates democratic liberty and civility. The two tendencies— tyranny of the majority and democratic licentiousness-- have been manifest in the phenomenon of mob-rule (mobocracy/ochlocracy), whose vestiges have vividly demonstrated the contradiction of democracy in contemporary times. The prospect for resolving this contradiction does not seem to obtain in liberal democracy as it is currently practiced in the world today. What is required is an earnest political dispensation that is capable of resolving and transcending the excesses and contradictions of democracy towards instituting a truly free republican fiduciary.

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